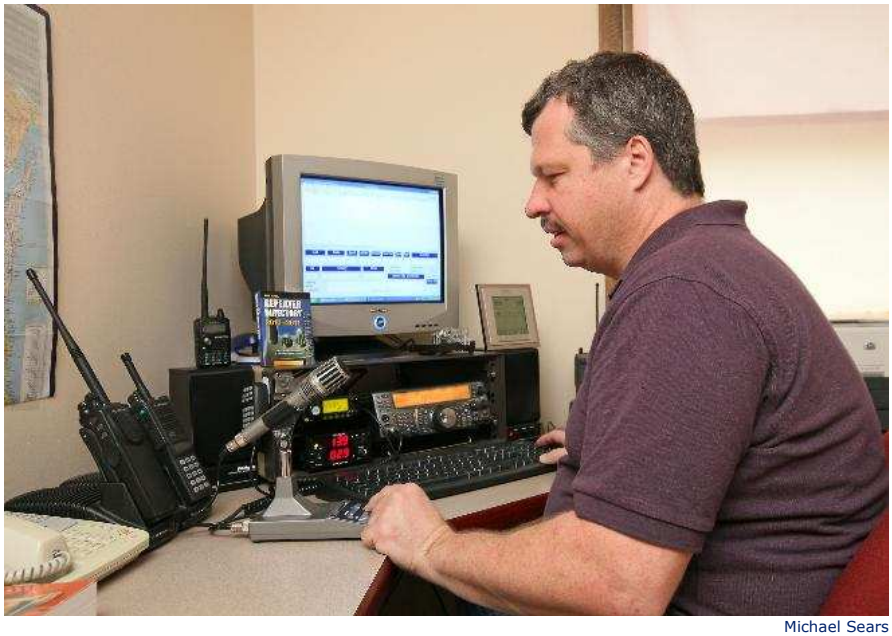
Ham radio operators stay true to social media's low-tech roots



Michael Sears

David Schank, call sign KA9WXN, sits at the ham radio set-up in his Greenfield home.

By Rick Barrett of the Journal Sentinel Oct. 6, 2013

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Michael Sears

Ham radio gear at David Schank's home. "The fun part is getting on the radio and not having any idea who you are going to be talking with," Schank says — maybe someone in Croatia or the Canary Islands.

Long ago, before Facebook, Twitter and email, ham radio operators were the original social media geeks.

And they're still out there, in greater numbers than ever, chatting and messaging each other all over the world without an Internet connection or even a telephone line.

Currently, there are more than 704,000 amateur radio license holders in the U.S., an all-time high and up from 662,600 in 2005, according to the National Association for Amateur Radio.

Even with Skype and other Internet-based ways to chat, "ham" radio operators, as they call themselves, are holding their own with radio sets from the 1950s and new technologies including satellites that boost voice, video and Morse code messages.

It's social media that's more than a century old, says David Schank, a ham radio operator from Greenfield.

Unlike a lot of social media, ham radio users generally don't bad-mouth each other over the air. There's a respectful tone to the conversations, even when users are from countries at odds with each other or they have conflicting political views.

Ham radio communication is more person-to-person than an anonymous posting on the Internet or a tweet that nobody reads.

"On the radio, you can tell if you've offended someone or said the wrong thing. It's probably best not to talk about religion or politics," Schank said.

Conversations lasting more than 30 minutes are called "rag chewing."

On the flip side, some radio chats last only a few seconds as participants try to make as many contacts to far-flung places as possible in a given time period.

"There's a certain thrill in it. Every time you work a new country and make a contact, it's like going fishing and catching a musky," said Thomas Ruhlmann with the Ozaukee Radio Club. (For the most part, English is the standard language for ham radio traffic, even overseas, operators say.)

Ruhlmann has been a ham radio operator for 61 years. When he was a youngster, his mother got her radio license because Thomas and his brother were up all night on the radio and she couldn't sleep.

Now, Ruhlmann enjoys restoring radios from the 1950s.

"It's kind of like the guys who are retired now and have the hot-rod cars they always wanted as a kid but couldn't afford then," he said.

Ham radio hotbed

Wisconsin is a stronghold for ham radio enthusiasts. It has some of the nation's oldest radio clubs, and a "tower farm" near Eau Claire is known for its broadcasting prowess.

On any given day, an operator here might connect with someone in Europe, the Middle East, South America or a remote island in the Pacific Ocean. By bouncing signals off the ionosphere, and even off the moon, ham radio can reach around the world.

When atmospheric conditions are ideal, you hardly need an antenna.

"The fun part is getting on the radio and not having any idea who you are going to be talking with. Then all of a sudden you are connected with someone in Croatia or the Canary Islands," Schank said.

Ham radio uses many frequencies across the VHF, UHF, HF and even microwave bandwidths. Operators must pass a Federal Communications Commission test to acquire a license and cannot use the radio for business purposes.

Ham isn't the same as citizen band radio, which uses far less powerful equipment for communicating over shorter distances, requires no license and uses fewer channels.

While the Internet has cut into ham radio's popularity to some extent, it also has improved technology. Portable equipment carried in a backpack uses less power than it takes to run the light bulb in a refrigerator, said Sean Kutzko, spokesman for the American Radio Relay League, founded in 1914.

"People are finding it pretty darn cool that, even in the 21st century, they are able to throw a wire into a tree and communicate with somebody halfway around the world. And it doesn't involve a cellphone or the Internet," Kutzko said.

"It's kind of like electronic fishing," he said. On weekends, he sets up his portable ham radio station in a public park and literally throws a wire into a tree to see who he can connect with.

Some radio enthusiasts like to see how far they can reach with minimal equipment. They've used stove pipes or bed springs for antennas to talk with someone in Russia.

Some enthusiasts like to bounce signals off meteor trails, for the technical challenge, while others are more into chatting with people overseas.

Crisis communication

Ham radio is critically important for emergency communication when telephone lines and the Internet are down. Cellphone coverage also can be down in emergencies.

A ham operator in Waukesha was credited for saving lives when he picked up a distress call from a sailboat in the Pacific Ocean. He alerted the Mexican Navy, which launched a search for the sinking vessel.

Ham operators routinely bring their rigs to public events, such as bicycle races, to provide communication and assist emergency medical personnel.

"You can make this hobby into whatever you want it to be," said Bob Kastelic with the Milwaukee Area Amateur Radio Society.

Many friendships come from tinkering with equipment and getting involved in local radio clubs. Some ham operators have known each other for decades, over the air, even if they've never met in person.

Each operator is assigned a unique identifier call sign, which they use to initiate over-the-air conversations.

When an operator dies, often their radio identifier is included in their obituary.

They've gone "silent key" is the term used to note their passing.

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